

Swann in Spain: Proust's Ghost in the Novels of Javier Marías

Sonia Assa

SUNY College at Old Westbury, New York, US

Since the publication of *Corazón tan blanco* (*A Heart so White*) (1992), many critics have compared the Spanish novelist Javier Marías to Marcel Proust. Both favor long, meandering sentences, in which they insert voluminous asides. In thematic terms, their narratives are constantly involved with meditation over the extent to which we can understand the past, or the degree to which we can know either ourselves or others. Beyond their common preoccupation with time and memory, I will consider some remarkable similarities between Marías' and Proust's formative years and the role translation played in the development of their style. I will show the many ways in which Proust "haunts" Marías: in his metaphorical use of the translating practice, in his love of deferral, and in his brooding first-person narrators, racked by the anxiety of ignorance.

Keywords: Proust's ghost, translation, anxiety of ignorance, first-person narrators

Introduction

Since the publication of his novel *Corazón tan blanco* (*A Heart so White*) in 1992, the Spanish novelist Javier Marías has often been compared to Marcel Proust. A Marías sentence, like a Proustian sentence, is a meandering road, leisurely branching into byways and giving glimpses of distant views, before eventually arriving at its destination. In thematic terms, just like Proust, Marías juggles with time, memory, and doomed re-enactments. Both Proust's and Marías' narratives constantly involve meditation over the extent to which we can understand the past, or the degree to which we can know either ourselves or others. Characters and narrators confront the duplicity of words, their inability to adhere to the truth, the infinite possibilities of interpretation, as well as the maddening unknowability of the other. Both are stylish, ironic, cerebral, bookish and exquisitely obsessive.

Beyond their common preoccupation with time and memory, Marías presents some remarkable similarities with Proust. His Proustian-like obsession with the fluidity of "interpretation" may have had its source in his experience with translation—an experience he shared with Proust. From their common, formative years of practice in this art, they both developed, not only their acute consciousness of the powers and uncertainties of interpretation, but also a fondness for digressions. Further, abandoning the third person—despite Henry James' famous warning against the "terrible fluidity of self-revelation"¹—they both created a new and unusual "I" that is "both fissured and fused", as Peter Brooks describes it in his review of Roger Shattuck's *Proust's Way* (2000). Reincarnations of Swann, the self-absorbed, compulsive, and brooding first person narrators of Marías' mature novels (*All Souls*, *A Heart so White*, *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me*, *Your Face Tomorrow* and

Sonia Assa, Associate Professor, SUNY College at Old Westbury.

¹ "Suffice it, to be brief, that the first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness [...] Strether has [...] exhibitional conditions to meet [...] that forbid the terrible fluidity of self-revelation". Preface to *The Ambassadors* (2008), pp. 13-14.

The Infatuations—written between 1989 and 2011), exhibit a confusing likeness with their creator and a pronounced anxiety of ignorance. They struggle with an overpowering fear of knowing that is only matched by their uncontrollable desire to “know all” about the object of their desire or of their curiosity. They pour out their manic musings while obsessively watching, stalking, and eavesdropping. They pry and snoop and lie in wait and the unbearable knowledge they acquire transforms their former selves irretrievably: they can never again be what they were.

“Ghosts” and “haunting” are favorite concepts and recurring themes in both Marías’ novels and his numerous critical essays. Proust may be said to “haunt” him at many different levels: in his metaphorical use of the translating practice, in his love of deferral, and in his brooding narrators. This paper is an attempt to catch the elusive presence: Proust’s “ghostly” haunting of Marías’ narrative works.

The Uses of Translation

Breton opens *Nadja* (1927) with a reference to the proverb “Dis-moi qui tu hantes, je te dirai qui tu es” (Tell me whom you’re haunting, I will tell you who you are), wishing to brood on the “scarce reality” of the writing “I” (Breton, 1964, p. 9), to later establish that “qui te hante” is a more pressing question. Marías shares this opinion, seeming particularly interested in who haunts him. He describes himself as “inhabited”, rather than “influenced”, by a number of writers, as by familiar ghosts. In his extensive interview with Sarah Fay for *The Paris Review*, he made it quite clear that Proust was one (of two) who haunted his imagination: “If I close a book and there are no echoes, that is very disappointing [...]. I prefer something that leaves a resonance, an atmosphere behind. This is what happens to me when I read Shakespeare and Proust [...].” (Marías, 2006). The narrator of *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* (Marías, 1996) dedicates a long disquisition to the concept of “haunting”:

There is an English verb, “to haunt” and a French verb, “hanter” which [...] both describe what ghosts do to the places and people they frequent or watch over or revisit; depending on the context, the first can also mean “to bewitch,” in the magical sense of the word, in the sense of “enchantment,” the etymology is uncertain, but it seems that both come from other verbs in Anglo-Saxon and Old French meaning “to dwell,” “to inhabit,” “to live in” permanently (dictionaries are as distracting as maps). Perhaps the link was merely that, a kind of enchantment or haunting, which, when you think about it, is just another name for the curse of memory, for the fact that events and people recur and reappear indefinitely and never entirely go away, they may never completely leave or abandon us, and, after a certain point, they live in or inhabit our minds, awake and asleep [...]. (Marías, 1996, pp. 66-67)

In such a manner does Proust seem to “watch over”, “bewitch”, and “enchant” the writing Marías; inhabiting his mind, awake and asleep, and finding embodiment in the repetition of scenes charged with Proustian resonance.

Marías’ uses of translation are a case in point. Just like for Proust, his schooling in writing began with translating. For both, this rigorous discipline cleared the path towards self-discovery. According to Autret, Burford and Wolfe (1987), it is through his translations—or iconoclastic rewritings—of Ruskin, that Proust acquired his respect for the “preciseness of vision”,² his belief that style is “une question non de technique, mais de vision” (Proust, *Le temps retrouvé*, p. 474), while he succeeded in working out of his system a certain

² “This respect for the preciseness of vision [...] in the service of artistic truth is the first lesson that Proust learned from John Ruskin. [...] His theory of aesthetic perception in which the artist’s act of seeing takes precedence over any received ‘ideas’ or ‘symbols’ or the exactitude of scientific ‘description’ clearly descends from Ruskin’s analysis of Turner’s perceptual ‘impressionism’”. Autret, Burford and Wolfe (1987), *Marcel Proust on Reading Ruskin*, p. xxviii.

estheticism. He came to the realization that the task of the writer was not to “invent”, but rather to “translate” that which is within everyone of us³. He also learned and practiced digression as a major device of his style⁴. Likewise, Marías translated a vast corpus of English literature in an attempt to cleanse himself of the trappings of rhetoric and breathe a new life into the Spanish novel (Wood, 2012, pp. 41-44). As he argues in his essay “Desde una novela no necesariamente castiza” (From a not necessarily authentically Spanish novel), included in the collection entitled *Literatura y Fantasma (Literature and Ghost)*, he was forging his own style in part through the rejection of the social realist manner which had dominated the Spanish novel in the Franco years, and which by the late 70's felt insufferably rhetorical and outdated to the new generation of Spanish writers (Marías, 1993, pp. 49-54). The bulk of this translating work was something Marías undertook while he was still a young writer, and he has repeatedly pointed to it as an essential part of his development. Summing up his trajectory at a conference he gave for the Fundación Juan March in 2008, he posited that translating was “better than reading”, and that a translator was not only a “privileged reader” but also “a privileged writer”.⁵ His careful examination of the nature of the translating process in two important essays also included in *Literatura y Fantasma*: “Ausencia y memoria en la traducción poética” (Absence and Memory in Poetic Translation) and “La traducción como fingimiento y representación” (Translation as Make-Believe and Representation) proves that he has given it substantial thought.

Marías' approach to his subject has a distinct Proustian feel in conception and language. In the first essay, he argues for the creativity inherent in translation, a belief he shares with Octavio Paz, Walter Benjamin, and George Steiner. The translator experiences the foreign text as an “absence” (in his language): “he does not reproduce, copy or calque” [...] but rather “gives expression always for the first time to a unique, unrepeatable and un-transferable experience; he creates in his language that which in his head can be found in another language” (“Ausencia y memoria en la traducción poética”, 1993, p. 191).⁶ In the second essay, Marías compares the act of translating to representational arts: he develops the concept of a “fictive pact” entered into by the reader, in much the same way as theatre audiences suspend disbelief for the duration of the performance (“La traducción como fingimiento y representación”, 1993, pp. 198-99). He believes that a good translation should foreground the otherness of the original text (“La traducción como fingimiento y representación”, 1993, p. 201); and he concludes that, “in the final analysis, the work of the translator does not consist so much in allowing or facilitating the mere understanding of a text, but rather in incorporating the text in and to his/her own language” (“La traducción como fingimiento y representación”, 1993, p. 203).

When Marías underscores the humbling nature of the work of the translator, comparing it to that of the actor

³ “[...] je m’apercevais que le livre essentiel, le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n’a pas, dans le sens courant, à l’inventer, puisqu’il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire. Le devoir et la tâche d’un écrivain sont ceux d’un traducteur”. (I realized that a great writer does not have to, in the ordinary sense of the word, invent the essential book, the only true book, since it already exists in each one of us, but to translate it. The duty and the task of a writer are those of a translator) Proust (1988), *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 4 (*Le temps retrouvé*), p. 469.

⁴ “[...] the lessons that the French writer garnered from his English predecessor, can be broadly summarized in terms of three characteristic modes of the imagination: similar ways of seeing (precisions of the critical eye), similar ways of feeling (resonances of the literary and affective memory), and similar ways of writing (a constant struggle with digression, a syntax of complex subordination, [...] and a proliferating network of interactive images)”, Autret, Burford and Wolfe (1987), *Marcel Proust on Reading Ruskin*, p. li.

⁵ “La traducción ha sido un elemento importantísimo para mí por lo que ha supuesto de aprendizaje. Es incluso mejor que leer. Un traductor además de un lector privilegiado es un escritor privilegiado (Translation has been an extremely important element for me because of the learning involved. It’s even better than reading. A translator, besides being a privileged reader, is also a privileged writer)”, quoted by Elsa Fernández-Santos, October 3rd, 2008.

⁶ Translations of quotes from Marías' essays and interviews are mine.

who “erases himself in order to become his character”, and “renounces his style for the sake of another”,⁷ he is summarizing an experience similar to that of Proust. But just like Proust who, thanks in part to the teachings of Ruskin, came to believe in his own talent and found the willpower to dedicate himself to his own work (Autret, Burford, & Wolfe, 1987, p. ix), Marías points out that by 1978, he “had finally crossed the shadow line and reached the maturity and daring necessary to become an interpreter of (him)self” (“Desde una novela no necesariamente castiza”, 1993, p. 58). Both writers eventually renounced translation for fear of contaminating their own voice, of being “mastered and made lame by what [they had] imported”, in Steiner’s words (1998, p. 315). For both, reading and translation were at once “exemplary experiences”, central to their development, and “powerful seductions” (Autret, Burford, & Wolfe, 1987, p. xiv).

Most notably Marías translated a text that had never been put into Spanish before, the most notorious example of infinitely branching digressions: *Tristram Shandy*. As Wood (2012) remarks: “Sterne gave him a confidence to allow his narrators to digress at leisure; to slow down or even temporarily suspend the narrative flow in order to pursue reflections of a personal or philosophical nature” (p. 258). Thus both Proust and Marías internalized the art of deferral and excess, or “loitering”, to borrow Ross Chambers expression. Chambers (1999) stresses the association of digression with memory:

As in Proust or Proust, digression’s counternarrative affinity with the paradigmatic dimension, the dimension of lists and listing, is itself associated with memory, as the faculty that both realizes mental continuities and, on occasion, interrupts them with sudden disjunctions, or “second messages”. (Chambers, 1999, p. 119)

In his article “Errar con brújula” (Erring/Roving with a compass), Marías places himself in the company of Cervantes, Sterne, Proust, masters of “errabundia”, whose digressions are not to be seen as frivolous, but as essential (Marías, 1993, p. 93). Contrasting himself with novelists who know from the outset what their text will be like, who work “with a map”, he claims that he works “with a compass”: he does not know where he is headed, what will happen, how many characters will appear, or even what his plot may turn out to be. This writing blindly or in the dark and this “not knowing” allows him to settle himself in digressiveness (Marías, 1993, pp. 91-92). His “poetics of errancy” consists of voluminous musings, with assertions and expansions, asides and parentheses, associations and reiterations, etymological enquiries and heaps of synonyms. With a translator’s compulsion to find exactly the right word, but unable to choose, Marías throws in the whole thesaurus. In addition, snatches of thoughts, mystifying quotes and fragments of dialogue emerge again and again throughout his narratives, as if out of the opaque ocean of memory, creating running leitmotifs. Just like in Proust, the long developments, the constant auto-corrections and distinctions, the intertextual references, end up subverting the rhetorical message. However, it is not indifferent to stress that, as many critics have noted—William Deresiewicz, for example, in his review of *Your Face Tomorrow* for *The Nation* (2010)—while Marías’s sentences are long, they are mostly built on parataxis (units attached one after the other), rather than hypotaxis (units arranged in relationships of subordination), as is mostly the case with Proust. Through associative leaps, Proust may take us far from his point of departure; but always making connections and always returning to the matter at hand, he closes the loop. In Marías’ narratives, the burden of philosophical or linguistic asides can weigh the reader down; the writer’s mind sometimes seems to spin dizzily out of control. Actions are so

⁷ “[...] al poner la lengua al servicio de otro, hay una renuncia al propio estilo que es muy importante. Es como el actor que se borra a sí-mismo para convertirse en el personaje” (When one puts one’s language at the service of another, there is a renunciation to one’s own style that is very important. It’s like the actor who erases himself to become his character), quoted by Fernández Santos, October 3rd, 2008.

wrapped in reflection and musings that reality seems to collapse. Digressions are as waves, endlessly following each other, endlessly adding, erasing, and receding, an image of the centerless, amorphous place of identity his narrators inherited and inhabit.

Proustian Narrators

What Marías seems to have acquired predominantly from his experience as a translator, is the consciousness of the centrality of the “interpreting” process in all linguistic exchanges and consequently a distrust of certainty, an incapacity to believe in the trustworthiness of language. If translation is “fingimiento” (pretence, make-believe), so is fiction writing. Grohman (2011) remarks on the “profound distrust of certainty that all of Marías’ narratives evince and the extreme skepticism regarding the possibility of reproducing the world through writing [that he expresses]” (p. 186). This distrust is startlingly evident in many assertions made by his narrators, for example the following from *Negra espalda del tiempo* (*Dark Back of Time*) (2001):

[...] the simple fact of saying [an anecdote] already distorts and twists it, language can't reproduce events and shouldn't attempt to [...] fiction creeps into the narration of what happened, altering or falsifying it. The time-honored aspiration of any chronicler or survivor—to tell what happened, give an account of what took place [...]—is, in fact, mere illusion or chimera, or, rather, the phrase and concept themselves are already metaphorical and partake of fiction. “To tell what happened” is inconceivable and futile, or possible only as invention. (Marías, 2001, pp. 7-8)

Or this one, which is from *A Heart so White* (1995):

Recounting an event distorts it, recounting facts distorts and twists and almost negates them, everything that one recounts, however true, becomes unreal and approximate, the truth doesn't depend on things actually existing or happening, but on remaining hidden or unknown or untold [...]. (Marías, 1995, p. 185)

Pupil of Proust, Marías courts confusion, creating first-person narrators/protagonists who may bear his name, practice his profession, live in his neighborhood, and travel where he has travelled. They tell stories they have seen, or heard, stories in which they have participated, often as covert witnesses, so that they are both homodiegetic narrators, being included in their own tales, and heterodiegetic, because they seldom participate directly—though in a few cases they do. Anglophile *madrileños* with roving eyes and donjuanesque suavity, they are detached and cool, brooding, analytical, and pathologically curious.

Like Proust or Swann, they cannot prevent themselves from desiring to know, no matter how distrustful they may be of what they hear, no matter how doubtful of ever arriving at any truth. A rambling talk with Sir Peter Wheeler, Oxford scholar and M16 agent, and father-figure to Jaime Deza, the narrator of *Your Face Tomorrow*, reveals unthinkable horrors. *A Heart so White* begins, “I did not wish to know, but I have since come to know ...” and Deza warns, “One should never tell anyone anything [...] sometimes it's enough just to say something out loud for the air to grasp and distort it” (*Your Face Tomorrow*, 1: *Fever and Spear*, 2005, p. 4). But the impossibility, the futility or danger of the task, however, many times foretold, does not discourage the protagonists. Strikingly, they are all dealers in words: interpreters, ghost writers, screenwriters, spies; lecturers, translators, publishers; all somewhat shady, somehow untrustworthy, and always at the center of strange convergences. They make frequent use of a subordinating conjunction much favored by Mallarmé and the Surrealists: “como si” (“as if”), to usher in similes but also to evoke the never to be. In *A Heart so White*, translation is subject to distortion, or fanciful and humorous ad-libbing, at the hands of the first person narrator, Juan, a professional interpreter. Throughout the book, Juan muses on hearing and overhearing, on secrets and

silence, on the blurry lines between authenticity and forgery, on the power and danger of the stories we tell. The stories he tells and is told may be self serving lies or part truths, may conceal the truth, or may even deflect the future, stop an event from happening, as he realizes:

The truth never shines forth, as the saying goes, because the only truth is that which is known to no one and which remains untransmitted, that which is not translated into words or images, that which remains concealed and unverified, which is perhaps why we do recount so much or even everything, to make sure that nothing has ever really happened, not once it's been told. (*A Heart so White*, 1995, p. 186)

All Marías' narrators are watchers, mostly observing life rather than participating in it, giving an account of it with, in the words of Jaime Deza, "the inevitable feeling that one was looking out of a train window while travelling along, or rather, while permanently stopped at a station" (*Fever and Spear*, 2005, pp. 213-14), an image that calls to mind Proust's narrator at the train window, on his way to the sea, in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*. In numerous interviews, Marías has consistently described his narrators as just that: passive observers, "ghosts". He told Sarah Fay in 2006:

One of the best possible perspectives from which to tell a story is that of a ghost, someone who is dead but can still witness. [...] a ghost is someone to whom everything has already happened, someone who cannot really intervene—or only slightly. At the same time, it is someone who still cares about what he left behind, so much so that he comes back. You could say that my narrators are ghosts in that particular sense. They are passive, but they are still curious, they are observant. (Interview for *The Paris Review*)

And he reiterated, in almost the same words, to Carlos Fuentes in August 2012:

Most of my narrators are interpreters in the wide sense of the term. They don't intervene or act much; they watch, they observe, they are mostly passive witnesses [...] In a sense they are ghosts, and I have said in many occasions that the point of view of a ghost seems to me an excellent point of view for narrating [...]. (Interview for *La Nación*)

In *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* (whose title is a quote from Shakespeare's *Richard the Third*, the line said by the ghosts who visit the king on the eve of the battle of Bosworth Field, the ghosts of his victims), Victor, a screenwriter and sometimes ghost-writer, becomes surreptitiously involved in the lives of perfect strangers whom he proceeds to "haunt". In *The Infatuations*, the narrator is a woman who works in publishing and professes her loathing for publishers and authors alike in scathing, sour comments. Whether she is someone who can be trusted remains unclear throughout the novel; but, just like ghosts, she is a stalker, albeit a harmless one, obsessed with the painfully Oedipal longing to insert herself into the destiny of a man and woman she has noticed at the café where they are regulars.

Patrick Mathieu observed in *Proust, une question de vision* (2009) that *In Search of Lost Time* begins with "une histoire de fenêtre": that magical frame which makes description possible and, since the Renaissance, has helped establish a sense of volume and therefore of reality (p. 158). He explains that the window acts as a frame, separates the subject, and establishes a distinction between the perceiver and the perceived, between the *voyeur* and what he sees, as it highlights the very conditions of vision. Windows "cut out" the world as well as the literary text which they organize and structure (Mathieu, 2009, p. 158). In fact, the window being "culturally coded" signals "the setting up of fiction" (Mathieu, 2009, p. 172). Watching the outside through the window, or, alternately, looking in from outside, attempting to divine what is going on behind closed shutters, both Proust's and Marías' narrators, uncommonly often "at the window", establish their affective, aesthetic, and narrative bond with the world. They watch, analyze, and interpret the words and acts of others. They are outsiders

looking in, just like the reader. They exist in liminal spaces, windows, embrasures, doors slightly ajar, street corners—and they trespass boundaries, ignoring demarcations of privacy. As they speak in the first-person, they are themselves seldom cast as the observed; but in contrast to Marcel, Marías' narrators ultimately reveal very little about themselves.

In *Your Face Tomorrow*, a three-volume saga, Jaime Deza's covert job is a metaphor for the novelistic act: he is an "interpreter of the lives of others". He is charged by his sinister boss, Bertram Tupra, with describing what he discerns in the faces and voices and behavior of "suspects" he watches through a one-way mirror, from the darkened side. As a writer-substitute, he is a reader of character, but he can never be sure of what he sees, and we can never be sure of what he interprets. He describes his "job" in numerous occasions:

I have been paid for talking about what did not exist and had not yet happened, the future and the probable or merely possible—the hypothetical—that is, to intuit and imagine and invent; and to convince. (*Fever and Spear*, 2005, p. 10)

What I interpreted were—in just three words—stories, people, lives. Often stories that had not yet happened. (*Fever and Spear*, 2005, p. 212)

I was describing and deciphering flesh and blood people and pontificating and making predictions about them, and I saw now that regardless of whether I was right or wrong, what I said could have disastrous consequences and determine their fate if placed in the hands of someone like Tupra. (*Poison and Shadow and Farewell*, 2011, p. 425)

What defines Deza as a character is his "instability" (Wood, 2012, p. 319). Inhabiting two languages, he is a Spaniard and/but speaks English as a Briton. His language becomes inflected or infected by anyone with whom he may come in contact. As Wood (2012) observes, "his desire to please his handlers quickly turned fleeting impressions into certainties and the vocabulary of trust and mistrust into second nature" (p. 319). His very name shifts; he is called Jack, Jacques, Jacobo, Jaime, depending on his interlocutor, and, with malicious intent, Iago, by his boss.⁸ Towards the end of the novel, on the brink of committing an act of violence he would never have dreamt he could perform, Deza quotes Iago's famous words, "I am not what I am", in English, and then translates them. "Oh yes", he muses, "you are never what you are—not entirely, not exactly [...] What's more, you can repeat over and over Iago's disquieting words, not only after taking action, but doing it too ..." (*Poison and Shadow and Farewell*, 2011, pp. 345-46).

So, as Proust's narrator's main lesson is that "the other" is more a projection of our desires than a reality, that "a person does not stand motionless and clear before our eyes, but is a shadow which we can never penetrate" (Proust, *Le côté de Guermantes*, 1988, p. 367)—likewise for Marías' narrators, the gathering of "truth" behind appearances, the search for knowledge and certainty about oneself or others is all in vain. Perception is altered in the retelling, or rethinking; there can be no objective reality. The growing awareness of facts and thoughts only succeeds in revealing the opacity of these very facts and thoughts—and perhaps in twisting destiny.

And yet, as Elizabeth Tallent shrewdly remarks in her review of *Tu rostro mañana*, distrust and abiding love go together:

(Marías' style) is so deeply alienated from the presumed trustworthiness of language that little ecstasies of qualification haze every too-adamant assertion. All its impediments serve an estranging love. Language, it begins to seem,

⁸ He is not the only character of Marías' novels whose name fluctuates; in *The Infatuations*, the narrator is not sure whether "Desvern" or "Deverne" is the proper form of the name of one of the principal characters. This may be a nod to Cervantes' famous hesitation about Don Quixote's "true" name.

traffics continually in unearned certainty: it can't help it. To love language profoundly is to subject it to the closest questioning, to hold it fast when it tries to elude you, not to accept even its most adorable lies. In *Your Face Tomorrow*, language is Albertine. (Tallent, 2012)

Furthermore, just like for Proust, for whom the only thing that exists ultimately is art (or literature), so for Marías, through the voice of his narrators, “the only thing that counts” is “the story”:

For during my professional, or, shall I say, remunerated life in London, I learned that what merely happens to us barely affects us or, at least, no more than what does not happen, but it is the story (the story of what does not happen too), which, however imprecise, treacherous, approximate and downright useless, is nevertheless almost the only thing that counts, is the decisive factor, it is what troubles our soul and diverts and poisons our footsteps [...]. (*Fever and Spear*, 2005, p. 14)

And, in a characteristic cascade of words, Peter Wheeler speaks thus of human communication:

Talking, telling, saying, commenting, gossiping, passing on information, criticizing, exchanging news, tattle-taling, defaming, slandering and spreading rumors, describing and relating events, keeping up to date and putting others in the picture, and, of course, joking and lying. That is the wheel that moves the world, Jacobo, more than anything else; that is the engine of life, the one that never becomes exhausted and never stops, that is its life's breath. (*Fever and Spear*, 2005, pp. 332-33)

Eavesdropping Scenarios

Distrust, volubility, digressions, pricked up ears and watchful or errant eyes seem to go together. The will to know, the anxiety of ignorance make the narrators inveterate voyeurs and eavesdroppers. Just as in many Shakespeare plays, and in Proust, much of what characters and narrators learn in Marías' novels is through casual overhearing or purposeful spying. Someone—most often the narrator—is making sure his presence is unnoticed. We find ourselves, as readers, constantly sharing in a voyeuristic gaze, present as the third party between murmuring or quarreling lovers, private confessions, scenes or actions meant to be unseen. Many are the scenes, in the *Search*, in which the action of the narrative is understood through such a third party, witness to the action but separate from it (Swann watching Odette's lighted window from the street; the Narrator eavesdropping on Jupien and Charlus; the Narrator involuntarily spying, through a window, on Mlle Vinteuil and her lover, etc.). Most often, jealousy's ever unsatisfied desire for mastery over the life of the beloved motivates the tortured search to know the hidden recesses of her mind and actions; it triggers the quest for knowledge. In her examination of the theme of jealousy in literature, Rosemary Lloyd (1995) argues that, as an attempt to control what is uncontrollable (un-possessable, unknowable); jealousy becomes a trope for the act of writing. She says in her introduction:

Because jealousy is figured as watching and interpreting, as telling and silencing, it also acts as a trope for both consuming and creating art and literature. It is my argument that the act of reading and decoding the other that lies at the very heart of jealousy encapsulates both the creation and the deciphering of texts, that jealousy in literature is not merely a theme but also, and more vitally, a strategy, both readerly and writerly. (Lloyd, 1995, p. xi)

She stresses how, “[in literary texts] jealousy seems to unleash, in response to its tendency to chaos, a relentless analytical tendency” (Lloyd, 1995, p. 7). And she sees “the compulsion to watch” as “a central element of jealousy itself” (Lloyd, 1995, p. 10).

If the obsessive desire for precision and the inability to resist repetition are characteristics of jealousy, then Marías, just like Proust, is a writer defined by the jealous temperament. In response to jealousy's “tendency to

chaos”, they both display that defining trait, the “relentless analytical tendency”. Like Swann in the darkened street, “gazing at the one lighted window in an apartment block, attempting to divine what is going on behind the shutters, trying to establish a difference between the window’s message now and its message in the past” (Lloyd, 1995, p. 28), they are outsiders looking in, wishing to shed light on the truth, but doubting this could ever be done.

In Marías’ novels, however, the uncontrollable curiosity, the agonized quest for knowledge, whether manifested in the scopic impulse or in obsessive eavesdropping, is not always connected with jealousy. Jaime Deza stalks his co-worker and later his ex-wife’s lover; but he also spends long hours in his darkened apartment with binoculars trained on a male neighbor, across the street, who dances with abandon, alone, or with one, or two, partners. His fascination appears unrelated to any love interest. In *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me*, the narrator, posted in the street, watches a woman taking her sweater off in the apartment where his one-night stand (sister to this woman) has died in his arms. He spies on the family congregated at the funeral, follows them to a restaurant so that he may overhear their private conversation—and yet his spying only serves to satisfy his morbid desire to know something of the life of a woman he hardly knew.

Not one of Marías’ novels fails to include some such episode with a third party witness. In *The Infatuations*, because a door has not been closed, a crucial piece of information is overheard by the narrator, and therefore reaches us, the readers. In *A Heart so White*, the narrative unfolds around a series of voyeuristic scenes, many of them “balcony” or “window” scenes, eerily illuminated as under stage lights, where the narrator is watching or listening without being seen. Many plot twists hinge on these scenes, which are loaded with the intensity usually associated with the jealous lover’s presence, without including a jealous lover. Thus, the narrator eavesdrops, from the balcony of his hotel room, on a lovers’ conversation next door. Later in the novel, he will watch unseen, from his window, a shady character (who is also a friend of his father’s and perhaps his wife’s lover) who is himself watching stealthily the narrator’s apartment. In another episode, he keeps watching on the lighted windows of a friend’s apartment in New York, where, he knows, a lurid sex encounter is taking place. At the climax of the novel, he overhears his father confessing a past crime (the foundational story of his family) to his wife Luisa. This last “triangulated” scene itself contains the narration of a “balcony” scene: the father tells how he watched his wife’s bedroom balcony from the street, waiting to see the first flames of the fire he had ignited. As a result of this particular framing (“balcony scene” within a “balcony scene”: a “mise en abîme”) not only does the narrator receive the knowledge he had assured us “he did not wish to know”—the knowledge that destroys the fable of his origins—but so does his wife and we the readers. We, of course, had always wanted to know, and so did Juan, a compulsive “curieux”, in spite of his reiterated denials.

Bakhtin (1981) underscored the centrality of eavesdropping to the genre of the novel:

The literature of private life is essentially a literature of snooping about, of overhearing how others live... What matters are the everyday secrets of private life that lay bare human nature—that is, everything that can be only spied and eavesdropped upon. (pp. 4-5)

In her book *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust*, Gaylin (2002) calls our attention to the fact that eavesdropping has existed in the novel as long as the novel has existed, since its inception (p. 180). It dramatizes a primal human urge to know, the human craving for meaning and, in the novel, it “figures the everyday experience of knowledge acquisition: partial, incomplete, imperfect” (Gaylin, 2002, p. 9). “A non-consensual, deceptive activity”, it also represents a version of narrative’s origin, “a point where curiosity

takes hold and from which storytelling springs" (Gaylin, 2002, p. 8). A melodramatic activity, "eavesdropping assumes a double entente. It acts out both the urge to know and the fear of others knowing, both the compulsion to display and beneath the voices of skepticism, resentment and defiance" (Gaylin, 2002, p. 5). It implies placement of the listener in space (Gaylin, 2002, p. 2); and because there is "trespassing", it stages transgression.

Gaylin argues that the secret listener's position as an outsider, an interloper, helps him or her understand a situation more clearly because he or she is not directly implicated in it. This aspect of eavesdropping has significant ramifications for us, the readers of the novel, whom the writer, in constructing eavesdropping scenes for our pleasure, implicates as "an almost conspiratorial consciousness" (Gaylin, 2002, p. 8). We read because we are curious. The vicarious experience of other lives enables us to learn and grow, to transfer the experience of fiction to our everyday reality. Therefore, "the illicit listener figures readerly pleasure" (Gaylin, 2002, p. 8).

"But just as eavesdropping implies an eradication of the boundary between one space and another [...] so, too, does it seem infectious: once we eavesdrop, we are implicated in the story we have acquired" (Gaylin, 2002, p. 8). This is exactly what Marías' narrators fear the most; devastation and irretrievable change come from hearing rather than from seeing. Visual perception may inspire fabulation, but hearing implicates, makes one for ever knowing and co-responsible: "Listening is the most dangerous thing of all" says Juan, in *A Heart so White*; "listening means knowing, finding out, knowing everything there is to know, ears don't have lids that can close against the words uttered, they can't hide from what they sense they're about to hear, it's always too late" (Marías, 1995, p. 201). It's always/already too late; knowledge is poisonous (the "poison" of the title of the third volume of his trilogy), like a Nessus tunic thrown over us and from which we cannot extricate ourselves. Both Juan, of *A Heart so White*, and Jaime Deza, of *Your Face Tomorrow*, are engaged in an Oedipal backward search for the dark mysteries hidden in their father's or their fatherland's past. What they unveil are awful truths about treason, savagery and vile behavior—"fever and spear"—intertwined in the fabric of every day life. And so it is that, perhaps, since "everything one recounts becomes unreal", people, readers and writers, tell and tell endlessly, so that "once it's told, it's like it never happened" (*A Heart so White*, 1995, pp. 185-86).

Conclusion

Between Proust and Marías, our experience of privacy has undergone a sea change. Proust's topic was the primal human desire to know and to know the self, by examining one's own and other people's experience; the multiple desires and motivations which converge on every action, are described in minute, loving detail, a magnificent tapestry displayed for the reader's pleasure. By contrast, Marías' interpretative capacity seems to stress doubt, futility and a central space of emptiness. Could the reason be that his narrators are driven by curiosity rather than desire? That their obsessive need of observation ends up accumulating knowledge only for accumulation's sake? In the end, their desperate efforts to know, their painstaking recomposing of reality, only bring to the surface a few vivid fragments of a dark past which appear slight, compared to the vastness of what remains hidden: "There is almost no record of anything, fleeting thoughts and actions, plans and desires, secret doubts, fantasies [...] how little remains of each individual, how little trace remains of anything ...", moans the narrator of *Tomorrow in the Battle* (Marías, 1996, pp. 54-55). A dark playfulness, absent in Proust, reigns in Marías' novels. Still, Proust's ghost haunts them in the long and leisurely sentences, the fretful hearts, the baroque excess, and the conviction that story telling is "the wheel that moves the world".

References

- Autret, J., Burford, W., & Wolfe, P. I. (Eds. & Trans.). (1987). *Marcel Proust on Reading Ruskin: Préface to La Bible d'Amiens and Sésame et les Lys, with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Breton, A. (1964). *Nadja*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Brooks, P. (2000). The search continues. *The New York Times books review*, June 11th. Retrieved June 30th, 2015 from <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/11/reviews/000611.11brokkst.html>
- Chambers, R. (1999). *Loiterature*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Deresiewicz, W. (2010). No name or too many? On Javier Marías. *The Nation*, September 8th, 2010. Retrieved July 1st, 2015 from <http://www.thenation.com/article/154146/no-name-or-too-many>
- Fay, S. (2006). Interview of Javier Marías for *The Paris Review*. Retrieved June 30th, 2015 from <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5680/the-art-of-fiction-no-190-javier-marias>
- Fernández Santos, E. (2008). Escribir como jugar a las chapas (Writing like playing jacks): Review of Javier Marías conference at the Fundación Juan March, October 3rd, 2008. Retrieved on June 30th, 2015 from <http://www.elpais.com/diario/2008/10/03/cultura/1222984801-850215.html>
- Fuentes, C. (2012). Interview of Javier Marías for *La nación*. Retrieved on July 1st, 2015 from <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1494976-javier-marias-cada-vez-leo-menos-novedades-se-pierde-mucho-tiempo-en-eso>
- Gaylin, A. E. (2002). *Eavesdropping in the novel: From Austen to Proust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grohman, A. (2011). Roving with a compass: Digression, the novel and the creative imagination in Javier Marías. In A. Grohmann and W. Caragh (Eds.), *Digressions in European literature: From Cervantes to Sebald*. London and New York: Macmillan.
- James, H. (2008). *The ambassadors*. London and New York: Penguin Classics.
- Lloyd, R. (1995). *Closer and closer apart: Jealousy in literature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Marías, J. (1993). *Literatura y fantasma* (Literature and ghost). Madrid: Ediciones Siruela.
- Marías, J. (1995). *A heart so white*. (M. J. Costa, Trans.). New York: The Harvill Press.
- Marías, J. (1996). *Tomorrow in the battle think on me*. (M. J. Costa, Trans.). New York: The Harvill Press.
- Marías, J. (2001). *Dark back of time*. (E. Allen, Trans.). New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.
- Marías, J. (2005). *Your face tomorrow, 1 : Fever and spear*. (M. J. Costa, Trans.). New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.
- Marías, J. (2006). *Your face tomorrow, 2 : Dance and dream*. (M. J. Costa, Trans.). New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.
- Marías, J. (2011). *Your face tomorrow, 3 : Poison and shadow and farewell*. (M. J. Costa, Trans.). New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.
- Marías, J. (2013). *The infatuations*. (M. J. Costa, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Mathieu, P. (2009). *Proust, une question de vision : Pulsion scopique, photographie et représentation littéraire (Proust, a question of vision : Scopic impulse, photography and literary representation)*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Proust, M. (1988). *A la recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time)*, vol. 2: *Le côté de Guermantes (The Guermantes' Way)* and vol. 4: *Le temps retrouvé (Time regained)*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Steiner, G. (1998). *After Babel: Aspects of language and translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tallent, E. (2012). Caressing repetitions. *Three penny review*. Retrieved on July 1st, 2015 from http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/tallent_w12.html
- Topping, M. (2011) Errant eyes: Digression, metaphor and desire in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. In A. Grohmann and W. Caragh (Eds.), *Digressions in European literature: From Cervantes to Sebald*. London and New York: Macmillan.
- Wood, G. J. (2012). *Javier Marías' debt to translation (Sterne, Browne, Nabokov)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.